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Why the Road to Morocco Is Full of American V.I.P.'s

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MADRID — If the United States suddenly unleashes a cascade of Cabinet members on a friendly Arab nation, two possibilities suggest themselves. One is that the country is extremely important. The other is that its regime is in trouble.

Strategic planners have rarely put Morocco at the top of lists of pivotal states, but lately King Hassan II has been host to some of the most consequential people in Washington. Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger saw the King on Dec. 3. If the Polish crisis had not intervened, Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr. would have dropped by to visit him last week.

Gen. Vernon Walters, a Reagan Administration security trouble-shooter, has been in and out. So has Francis J. West Jr., Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs. He was followed by Adm. Bobby Inman, deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency. (The Moroccan press, perhaps fearful of blowing his cover, reported the presence of only an "Adm. Inman.")

There are a number of reasons for this attention. King Hassan's regime is, indeed, in trouble. One of the worst droughts in human memory has stricken the economy. In June, an outbreak of rioting in Casablanca, savagely repressed with the loss of possibly 500 lives, testified to a festering misery. The leaders of the socialist opposition in a timid parliamentary experiment are locked up, and two weeks ago, university students went on strike.

Worst of all, a sapping six-year-old war in the Western Sahara sputters on inconclusively, and Morocco's guerrilla foes seem to have gotten their hands on sophisticated ground-to-air missiles.

But Hassan, who has been on the throne for two decades, has been in trouble before. If he is in high fashion in Ronald Reagan's Washington, it may also be because, perhaps more than any other Arab leader — and even some European allies — he shares the Administration's view of the world. Like the President, the King believes the Soviet Union lies at the bottom of much of the tumult in the third world. He feels that the Carter Administration wavered in support of proven friends and that Morocco deserves American support.

As a test case for demonstrating this Administration's policy of helping its friends, Morocco has an added advantage. With increasing vehemence, King Hassan has argued that his main opponent in the unstable cockpit of North Africa is Libya. The emphasis on Libya takes the heat off Algeria, which provides the main rear base and diplomatic support for the Polisario guerrillas who are fighting for control of the Western Sahara. Since oil-blessed Algeria is also important to the United States — America is its largest trading partner — while Libya is a regarded as dangerous renegade, the geopolitical fit is perfect. "The major U.S. contribution to Morocco, and possibly the decisive one," said an American diplomat, "has been to tell Qaddafi that we've had it with him."

A Legacy of Boumedienne

The Moroccan thesis is that Algeria's President, Chadli Benjedid, would really like to be done with the Polisario, a legacy of his predecessor, the late Houari Boumedienne, who opposed Morocco's annexation of the Spanish Sahara in 1976. But, this argument goes, Libya, with support inside Algeria, keeps upping its stake in the Polisario, making it impossible for him to back out. Libya's alleged delivery of SAM-6 missiles to the guerrillas, the Moroccans argue, was a calculated provocation when a referendum endorsed by King Hassan and the Organization of African Unity seemed a possibility. But some diplomats think the Moroccan analysis underestimates Algeria's interest in keeping Hassan bogged down in the desert war.

Where the Carter Administration carefully balanced its relations with Algeria and Morocco, the Reagan team quickly tilted toward Morocco. One of its first acts was to approve the sale of 108 M-60 tanks which President Carter had delayed. The decision was announced just two days after Algeria had helped seal the deal that freed the American hostages in Iran. Although the United States has not recognized Morocco's annexation of the Western Sahara, American military attachés and important guests now regularly tour the battle zone — again, a contrast with the Carter policy.

So far, however, there is perhaps less to this rapprochement than meets the eye. The high-powered mission of Assistant Defense Secretary West ended, for example, in a commitment to train Moroccan pilots and to supply electronic countermeasures to help their jets evade missiles that downed five aircraft in October. "I don't think that we're rushing into anything," said a State Department Middle East expert. "It's high-level mutual admiration that doesn't go into too many details."

One constraint is money. Although Saudi Arabia has been footing a large chunk of the Sahara war bill, Morocco has not been able to take delivery of the M-60 tanks because it cannot pay for them.

The sudden rush of American diplomatic backing has perhaps been most useful in providing a smokescreen that permitted the Moroccan Army last month to abandon Guelta Zemmour and Bir Enzaran, two isolated garrisons outside a defense perimeter in northern part of the territory.

At a time of domestic strains, King Hassan certainly welcomes even diplomatic gestures, and will make one of his own by visiting Washington, possibly next month. France, the other major outside force in North Africa, seems to be tilting toward Algeria under President Fran,cois Mitterrand, who recently completed a historic visit to the former colony. A cynic might say that the United States and France, with no major rivalries in the area, were counterbalancing each other. The American policy of diplomacy by visible visitors, moreover, doesn't seem to have wrecked relations with Algeria. As the V.I.P.'s rolled into Morocco, Washington the sale of six Lockheed C-130 transports for the Algerian Air Force slipped through Congress without causing a stir.